

Levine, Amy-Jill and Douglas Knight. *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us*. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

Chapter Five

Who is the God of the Bible? Levine and Knight will tell us in this chapter. Or at least they will tell us that the God of the Bible cannot be described using single images.

But before they get there, they say something really bizarre (or at least I find it bizarre). They describe the creature which chatted with the woman and 'the earthling' (their rendition of 'adam') as a 'snake'. And as a 'subtle snake' (p. 133). I thought we had long since abandoned talking about a 'snake' when describing the שָׂרָף of Genesis 3 as 'snake' gives readers the completely wrong idea and because the 'שָׂרָף' doesn't lose its legs until later in the story so that, in the mind of the author of Genesis, this beast is not a 'snake' at all when it's discussing theology with the humans.

Levine and Knight don't explain their reason for using such an archaic translation of שָׂרָף and I really wish they would have.

Nevertheless, their reason for mentioning the story of the serpent becomes clear when they go on to discuss the wrestling of Jacob at Jabbok and Moses the murderer as deliverer of the Israelites: what sort of God allows such things as sin and struggling and oppression?

The God, they assert, that

... remains beyond any simplistic categorization (p. 135).

Still, there are hindrances to talking about this God. Four of them to be precise: 1- we can only approximate a description; 2- the very question of the existence of God; 3- the oft suggested notion that the God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New; and 4- the tendencies of people to impose their own views of God, on God.

And what is this God called anyway? Is it El or Elohim or El Shaddai or El Elyon or Yahweh. Whatever he is called

For the heirs of this scripture [i.e., Ex 6:3], the synagogue and the church and the mosque as well, the God attested by the Bible is a single God; there is none other (p. 147).

But clearly this God wasn't the only object of worship in the world of ancient Israel.

Kings could demolish and prophets could inveigh, but Baal worship along with other forms of worship disapproved of by the Bible's editors continued (p. 149).

And quite cleverly

... to the question, 'Did God have a wife?' the answer is not a simple no, but rather 'Not usually' and 'It depends on whom one asks' (p. 151).

This God (Yahweh) is portrayed as father, but attributes of the mother are also implicit. This God is also both demanding and forgiving, compassionate and condemning.

In times of crises, the prophets recognize divine mercy and steadfastness: in times of plenty the prophets insist that God's standards for righteousness be maintained (p. 163).

Surely Levine and Knight have their portrait of God right. Given the reality of this God (for ancient Israelites) how is he to be worshiped? That's the subject of the next chapter.

Jim West
Quartz Hill School of Theology